



COMMITTEE STATEMENT

**Opening Statement of Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT), Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education:
"Lessons Learned: Charting the Path to Educational Equity Post COVID-19"
March 25, 2021**

(As prepared for delivery)

"Ensuring all children have opportunities to achieve the American Dream must never be a partisan issue. All students – regardless of zip code or socioeconomic status – should have the freedom to attend the school that meets their unique needs, setting them up for lifelong success.

I grew up in the deep South during the time of Jim Crow and the KKK. Racial segregation and inequities in education are not just chapters in a history book to me – I've lived and experienced them firsthand. I'm the child of educators – my father received his Ph.D. from The Ohio State University and taught Agronomy at Florida A&M, my mother was a middle school teacher. I was taught from a young age the importance of education and hard work. I firmly believe education is the key to unlocking our children's future of possibilities.

Tragically, the COVID-19 pandemic has served as a major setback for K-12 students nationwide. The purpose of today's hearing might be to discuss educational equity post-COVID-19, but there can be no educational equity when classroom doors remain shut.

Too many poor families, many of them, students of color as well as those with disabilities, have been left with no educational option other than to wait on bureaucrats to follow the science and reopen schools. The Biden administration and this Congress have failed these families. Every day, our inaction worsens the educational disparities in our communities, which over time will also contribute to widening opportunity and wealth gaps. The best way to help struggling families is

to give them more freedom to make choices for their children's education, not by shutting them out of schools and closing doors to greater opportunities.

While numerous states and schools have listened to the science and implemented proper safety precautions to offer students and families safe, in-person instruction, too many students are trapped in school districts that have refused to reopen, causing irreversible harm to our nation's children.

This is far from equity and we must do better.

That's why House Republicans called for a bipartisan investigation into the effects school closures are having on children with disabilities. In a letter to Chairmen Clyburn, Maloney, Scott, and Pallone, my fellow Republicans wrote, 'Students with disabilities are falling behind. States and localities are not meeting even the minimal requirements... If states or localities are violating federal civil rights laws to the detriment of students, they must be investigated, and their actions corrected.'

Closed classrooms have also increased mental health problems among students. CDC data shows that mental health visits to the emergency room increased between 24 and 31 percent for children from March to October of last year. Additionally, a 2020 analysis by McKinsey and Company estimates that children of color may lose up to one year of learning compared to white students losing four to eight months, with an average overall learning loss of nine months.

These numbers are jaw-dropping.

We cannot allow future generations to fall further behind while the Biden administration tiptoes around the radical demands of teachers unions. Embarrassingly, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) demanded a host of left wing priorities such as Medicare for All, defunding the police, wealth and millionaire taxes, at least \$500 billion for schools nationwide, housing security, and a charter school moratorium, as 'safety' prerequisites for their in-person return to school.

But rather than address this outrageous wish list which has nothing to do with reopening schools, Democrats will claim that 'we all want schools to reopen.' Their actions, or lack thereof, speak louder than their words. In addition, the

Biden administration seems to change their tune daily on reopening schools. Even the Washington Post labeled their messaging a 'muddled mess.'

Let's follow the science. Just last week, the CDC reversed its course on six feet of social distancing, admitting that their previous guidance was politically motivated. This comes after CDC Director Walensky's statement that schools could reopen before all teachers are vaccinated, a statement that was later reversed because of pressure from teachers unions.

Like the CDC, Congressional Democrats are willing to bend the facts on their crusade to politicize our children's education. Democrats rammed through their so-called COVID relief bill even though this body had already allocated significantly more funding than the CDC said was necessary to safely reopen schools. Even worse, the funds appropriated through that partisan legislation have nothing to do with reopening schools this spring.

The data is clear: the longer schools stay closed the further children will fall behind, particularly those in disadvantaged groups. Yet the Biden administration and Democrats continue to prioritize unions over students and politics over science. This is no way to lead our nation through an unprecedented crisis. This is no way to chart a path towards educational equity.

The science is clear. Congress provided an abundance of funding. Yet, children are still stuck learning from behind a screen, forcing our youngest and most vulnerable to overcome insurmountable barriers to success. For far too long, Congress has been bitterly divided along partisan lines. Our kids deserve better. I hope we can come together not as Republicans and Democrats, but as parents, grandparents, and patriotic Americans to put the well-being of our children first.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today, particularly Mrs. Jennifer Dale, who will offer testimony on her experiences with harmful and lengthy school closures and how it has impacted her family."

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